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Sensory Experience, Sound and Queerness in Chantal Akerman's *Maniac Shadows* (2013)

Abstract

This article offers the first scholarly study of Chantal Akerman's installation *Maniac Shadows* (2013). It argues that the deviating sensory strategies at work in this installation form part of a process of 'queering' that allows for the expression of queer forms of embodiment and pleasure. These queer tactics include sonic excess and spatial disintegration, skewed framing, haptic auditory perception, and an emphasis on indeterminacy and ambiguity, primarily through the figure of the shadow. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's phenomenological approach to queerness, the article explores the sensuous queer effects arising from instances of audiovisual disorientation in Akerman's installation. It suggests that the centrality of shadows, combined with the amorphous soundscape and the presence of opaque images and oblique angles, produce jarring moments of strangeness that undermine notions of a stable unified subject and disrupt heteronormative space. Offering an alternative perspective to the autobiographical reviews of the installation that have emerged so far, the article suggests that Akerman's experimentation with spatial ambiguity is tied to a queerly-inflected unravelling that pervades *Maniac Shadows*, as the artist fashions a less constricting and more subversive relational space for herself and her audience to grow into.

Key words

Sound, Space, Queerness, Shadows, Sensory Disorientation, Domestic Space, Family Life

Chantal Akerman described her 2013 installation *Maniac Shadows* as a work embodying a rhythm of iteration and change, echoed by the three iterations of the work itself, which has been exhibited in New York, London and in the eastern suburbs of Paris. Following the first iteration at The Kitchen in 2013, the installation was presented as part of ‘Chantal Akerman – NOW’ in the subterranean location of Ambika P3 in London. Akerman had a strong consulting role in the production of this exhibition, which was jointly curated by Michael Mazière and A Nos Amours (Joanna Hogg and Adam Roberts). It opened in the months following Akerman’s death in October 2015, imbuing my own personal experience of this presentation of the work with feelings of absence and loss. I later visited the third and most recent iteration at ‘Chantal Akerman: *Maniac Shadows*’ (2016–17), an exhibition at La Ferme du Buisson, an outdoor nineteenth-century industrial site for contemporary art, located in Noisiel.¹ Having already encountered her installation *Maniac Summer* (2009) at the 2012 ‘Too Far, Too Close’ retrospective at Antwerp’s Museum of Contemporary Art, I was keen to experience *Maniac Shadows* at the London exhibition, which I found deeply moving. Consequently, the arguments I am making in this article refer primarily to this second iteration of the installation.

Whilst the layout of *Maniac Shadows* varies depending on the exhibition site, each iteration involves a video triptych (a three-part split screen with sync sound) positioned on a long wall in one of the larger rooms. The triptych comprises shots of unspecified domestic settings, and shots of two silhouettes intermittently embracing as they wander across a sandy beach. The triptych includes footage of Akerman’s mother Natalia in her apartment in Brussels and shots of Akerman herself.² On the walls adjacent to the triptych are the eponymous ‘shadows’. These shadowy projections comprise vast washed-out images of some of the domestic interiors, and the embracing silhouettes, that appear in the central video. The ‘shadows’, which are synchronized with the corresponding shots in the triptych, are dark, murky, and at times indiscernible. In a separate room, the visitor encounters a display of ninety-six photographs framed by a white border. Some of these images resemble doubles of those that appear in the triptych, producing a dizzying likeness between the images in the first room and those in the second. This montage of beguiling stills includes shots of translucent curtains against lit windows, tables and chairs positioned next to an open window, windowpanes misted over, a shower head, a toilet cubicle, an unknown woman sitting on a subway, and the embracing silhouettes from the triptych. Other unusual images show part of a wooden floor surrounded by shadow, and a sparkling close-up of bubbly water. The third part of the installation involves the projection of a film of Akerman reading aloud passages from a messy

pile of papers that contain the draft of the opening paragraphs of *Ma mère rit* (*My Mother Laughs*, 2013), a ‘photobiography’ (Schmid 2016: 1133) that Akerman was writing while she made the installation.³ Unlike the video triptych or the display of stills, this pivotal segment of *Maniac Shadows* is positioned differently in each iteration of the work. It acts as a sonorous hinge, linking the movement in the video triptych to the stasis of the framed stills through the sound of Akerman’s voice.

At the Ambika P3 exhibition, the layout of the second room was particularly memorable because it was narrow, redolent of a hidden passageway. The sprawling flow of the main gallery space accentuated the difference between the capaciousness of the first room where the triptych was displayed, and the dark corridor of the second. The film of Akerman reading was projected onto the back left-hand side of the second room, and her marginal positioning transformed her into a vulnerable but powerful outsider. She reminded me of a magical storyteller in a fairytale, whose voice accompanied the visitors as they approached the hypnotic spectacle of stills at the other end of the room, a space that felt to me almost spiritual. As I moved back and forth between rooms, I experienced a sparse, ‘inside-out’ feeling of comfort, due to the sound of Akerman’s gruff voice that disappeared and reappeared amid the sudden eruption of voices and footsteps in the gallery.

In her reluctant attempt to articulate what the installation comprises, Akerman remarked: ‘For me the whole piece is like throwing a stone into the river and then creating ripples and ripples and ripples and ripples... And those ripples are the shadows that you see on the left and right side of the video’ (Feldman 2013). This equation of shadows with ripples relates to aspects of the installation that I will explore in this article, namely, sound, movement, surface and space. I will argue that the deviating sensory strategies in operation form part of a process of ‘queering’, and that this pervasive process allows for the expression of queer forms of embodiment and intimacy. Whilst a number of studies have been published that attend to the queer politics of Akerman’s cinema, there is scope for more attention to be given to the intersections between the queer tactics of her filmmaking practice and her installation art.⁴ In the context of *Maniac Shadows*, I will suggest that the two entwined silhouettes that appear not only in the video triptych, but also in the ‘shadows’ on the adjacent walls, and in the display of photographs, provide a means for Akerman to experiment with the rejection of identity as a stable, coherent and unitary whole. We can presume these are the silhouettes of Akerman and ‘M’, an ex-lover the narrator returns to at the end of *Ma mère rit*, where a similar image is printed, showing their tall shadows, positioned side by side, on the rough surface of a pavement,

emblazoned by the final line of the book: ‘Even our shadows love each other as we walk’ (2013b: 197). In my view, the recurring images of the embracing silhouettes in *Maniac Shadows* immerse visitors in expressions of queer love and intimacy. My understanding of ‘queer’ is loosely shaped by J. Jack Halberstam’s description of queer as referring to ‘nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time’ (2005: 6). I contend that Akerman’s configurations of shadows in *Maniac Shadows* are wholly enmeshed with the queer possibilities of the work, even though these possibilities do not refer exclusively to sexuality.

For many, ‘queer’ is an expansive term that is used in divergent ways, including in problematic and homogenizing ways, when, for example, the intersectionality of different identities and communities is overlooked. In what follows, I want to examine the ways in which the ambiguity of shadows, combined with distortions of the sensory hierarchy, might produce expressions of queerness in productive ways.⁵ I have found Sara Ahmed’s phenomenological approach to queerness to be particularly fruitful because it allows for an engagement with questions of embodiment, spatiality, and the sensuous ‘queer’ effects resulting from instances of audiovisual disorientation in Akerman’s installation. It is important to stress that I do not consider Akerman’s focus on the inchoate form of the shadow as isolated from notions of gender and sexuality. My understanding of queer is not dissociated from the centrality of the term’s historical reference to same-sex sexual expression. To eschew this meaning would ‘dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself’, as Eve Sedgwick (1993: 8) emphasizes in her discussion of the multiple meanings and uses of ‘queer’. I am proposing that Akerman uses shadows specifically to celebrate modes of queer intimacy and desire in quietly tenacious ways that not only resonate with her existence as a queer and diasporic Jewish filmmaker, video artist, and writer, who works across media and cultural borders, but that also resist ‘filled out’, wholesome representations of heteronormative *and* homonormative love.⁶

Crucial to my argument is the claim that *Maniac Shadows* manipulates sensory experience to disrupt heteronormative space and restrictive conceptions of female embodiment and pleasure. The work envelops visitors in a sensory experience that engages them queerly with the disparate layout and immersive feel of the installation. Drawing on Ahmed’s work on ‘queer feelings’ (2014), I will argue that some of the images and sounds that feature in *Maniac Shadows* can be construed as queering the gallery space and producing feelings in the visitor of pleasurable discomfort, owing to the force of audiovisual opacity and skewed framing, which, heightened by the immersive soundscape, opens up new possibilities for queer

intimacies and patterns of relating. Ahmed describes comfort as a feeling of being at ease with one's environment so that 'it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins.' When one 'fits' with one's surrounding environment, 'the surfaces of bodies disappear from view' and 'bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies' (2014: 148). She likens heteronormativity to a 'form of public comfort' because it allows 'bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape'. For queer bodies that do not fit, and cannot fit with comfort and ease into these preformed spaces, discomfort and disorientation may be the overriding feelings that are felt, along with 'an acute awareness of the surface of one's body, which appears *as* surface, when one cannot inhabit the social skin, which is shaped by some bodies, and not others' (2014: 148, original emphasis). When bodies fail to 'sink into' spaces, as Ahmed writes, this failure can be construed as 'a "queering" of space' (2014: 152).

Thus, I want to suggest that the queerness of *Maniac Shadows* is inseparable from the sensory and spatial configurations it presents, which differentiates Akerman's mode of installation art from film and video installation more generally. This assertion is shaped by a second claim that I consider to be key: that *Maniac Shadows* cannot be understood without proper acknowledgement of its hybridity as an artwork. Indeed, one of the striking components of the installation, which is presented differently in each iteration, is the inclusion of the film of Akerman reading aloud passages in English from a rough draft of the opening paragraphs of *Ma mère rit*. This heartrending text is a performative 'self-portrait' in the making in which Akerman, in her role as first-person narrator, explores her relationship with her mother. Yet she does so at the same time as she articulates her feelings of not belonging, marked by her digression from the script of heteronormativity.⁷ In *Ma mère rit* the narrator refers to her childless status, her dislike of the institution of marriage, her unpredictable life as an artist, as well as her mother's disapproval of her smoking, her manners and her unkempt appearance.

When questioned in an interview about the geographical locations that feature in the video triptych in *Maniac Shadows*, Akerman responded nonchalantly: 'It's all over, it doesn't matter where. The point is that it's all over the place' (Feldman 2013). For Akerman, any attempt to sort the sights and sounds according to a specific taxonomy of place would stifle their expressive power. Whilst this casual comment might seem deliberately evasive, it should be understood in the context of Akerman's wider commitment as an artist to indeterminacy and plurality. In my view, this commitment is shaped by her creative attempts to navigate the intersecting, and at times irreconcilable, aspects of her identity as a queer Jewish woman, a lover, a daughter of a Holocaust survivor and a multi-media artist. These interconnections,

which are deftly exposed in *Ma mère rit*, seem to me to characterize the non-identitarian nature of the installation as a whole.

The figure of the shadow

Defined by the absence of light, shadows are intangible shapes characterized by indeterminacy and indexical ambiguity, suggestive of a worldly referent but never entirely identifiable. On a basic level, shadows can express a sense of danger, melancholy or forbidden desire, carrying an aura of mystery. They serve as a marker of authenticity, an indicator of depth and an anchor point between self and world. Shadows also have a rich cultural history and there is an extensive array of scholarship associated with them.⁸ They provide the focal point of many photographs and art works by 20th- and 21st-century avant-garde artists, including Giorgio de Chirico, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, the leading figure of the American Pop Art movement Andy Warhol and the contemporary artist Kara Walker. The openness of shadows to interpretation, and their ability to evade easy commodification, endows them with a subversive artistic power. Moreover, their playful allusion to a worldly source, combined with their fundamental slipperiness, lends them to a queer reading.

The installation's emphasis on shadows could be construed as an attempt to thwart reductive parallels between shadows and ingrained stereotypes of femininity (loss, lack, formlessness), reproduced by patriarchal culture. In her study of the shadowy 'elsewhere' presence of the lesbian figure as she has been represented in Western culture since the eighteenth century, Terry Castle writes of her "ghost effect" in the cinema world of modern life: elusive, vaporous, and difficult to spot — even when she is there, in plain view, mortal and magnificent, at the centre of the screen. Some may even deny that she exists at all' (1993: 2). It seems to me that in *Maniac Shadows*, Akerman's rendering of the silhouetted figures, along with their acousmatic voices, serves to disrupt some of these entrenched clichés that work to contain the threat of dissident female sexuality. She performatively resignifies the lesbian trope of the disembodied figure and the haunting spectre, to clear a space for alternative configurations of desire. This is where I believe *Maniac Shadows* differs sharply from Akerman's earlier installation *Maniac Summer* that saw her work with extreme abstraction, haunting negative images and the shadow as a marker of trauma and destruction. Akerman describes *Maniac Summer* as being about abstraction, explicitly referencing the Hiroshima atomic bomb in the gallery presentation text. In an interview with Elisabeth Lebovici, she

explains that the radiation emitted by the bomb ‘left afterimages on walls, shadows of the bodies of people who were standing there, in the instant before they died’ and she wanted to develop the idea using video (2012: 101; see also Rehberg 2012: 56–59). *Maniac Summer* comprises four video projections with sound, in colour and black-and-white, with the central video capturing moments of Akerman’s everyday life: we see her working, talking on the phone, and smoking in her apartment. The adjoining, abstract ‘afterimages’, a little like the shadowy projections in *Maniac Shadows*, function as fragments of memory of the central video and they carry connotations of catastrophe and death. Yet in *Maniac Shadows*, I maintain that the shadows function in a radically different way, serving to undermine notions of linear time, reproductive telos, and the discourse of authenticity, and in doing so they come to suggest queerness. Taken together, *Maniac Summer* and *Maniac Shadows* could be construed as expressing two unreconciled but interconnected strands of the personal and collective histories to which Akerman belongs.

Sonic and spatial disintegration

The shadows come to form a sort of synaesthetic oneness with the acousmatic sounds that wash through the gallery space. The video triptych includes three primary shadow shots: i) Akerman’s reflection in a close-up of water, ii) her silhouette on a sandy beach, iii) an intimate shot of the merged silhouettes of Akerman and her partner (see Figure 1).⁹ In this part of the video triptych, the top of their fused shadows spill over a log that forms a thick horizontal line, evocative of Akerman’s interest in boundaries, thresholds and all that exceeds a limit. Furthermore, the arresting presence of their silhouettes filmed on flat, bumpy and undulatory surfaces alludes to the flux of bodily shape and desire.

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

Figure 1: Chantal Akerman, *Maniac Shadows*, 2013 [09:15]. Courtesy of The Kitchen, New York.

The shadows attest to the installation’s exposure of the dislocation between one’s visual image of self and one’s corporeal sensations (tactile, kinaesthetic and acoustic). For the visitor, this disjunction is maintained owing to the intensity of the acoustic experience inside the

gallery space. At each venue I visited, I was struck by the oscillation between the personal and the impersonal, which occurred whenever moving anecdotes recounted by Akerman melded with the rough timbre of her voice and with the chaotic sounds of visitors moving through the gallery. Akerman's intimate utterances from *Ma mère rit* that relate to her mother and her family life, become lost in the wider acoustic environment. This intermittent occurrence highlights the fragility of Akerman's personal story of family life, and her vulnerability as an isolated individual faced with the indifference of passing time. However, I am suggesting that her sonic dissolution of self that continually takes place in this way, forms part of the work's sensory embrace of new possibilities for relating that do not depend on the notion of a stable unified subject or a static identity category. The overflow of sound emanating from the film of Akerman's reading, mixed with the audio from the video triptych, bleeds out into the gallery to merge with the soft clamour of visitors passing through. This sonic tide that moves rhythmically back and forth prevents visitors from fully comprehending the visual representations of the silhouetted figures or the words that Akerman utters. Instead, alternative 'sideways' possibilities of feeling the self in(to) the gallery space are emphasized, in ways that challenge the hegemony of sight and the seamless acquisition of knowledge. Emptied of characters and narrative form, the fragmentary experience of *Maniac Shadows* draws attention to the delicate border between the material and the immaterial. By prioritising ephemeral shadowy forms, and the transitory fusion of different sound types, and by valuing voice as always *more than* a vehicle of meaning, Akerman slows down our perceptual encounter with the work and encourages a questioning of straightforward identificatory processes.

At this juncture, it is important to reiterate that the video triptych in *Maniac Shadows* is non-narrative and fragmentary in style. Consequently, if perceived according to mainstream cinematic conventions, there appears to be no obvious motivation or explanation for the ordering or content of the shots. Yet when approached from an experimental and poetic perspective, the sights and sounds form an intricate web of meaning. In the second half of the triptych [08:12–10:16], the silhouettes of Akerman and her partner wandering over the indented surface of the sand play a prominent role. They walk a little, and the camera movement becomes jerky, before they stop to embrace and the movement ceases. This stuttering rhythm enacts the 'gyroscopic movement' and 'see-sawing kind of time' that Elizabeth Freeman describes as queer, due to its disruption of smooth forward movement that aligns itself with a 'hetero- and chrononormative' framework (2010: 33–35 & 38), where chrononormativity signifies 'the use of time to organize individual human bodies towards maximum productivity'

(2010: 3). The mass of sticks splayed out on the sand are set in contrast to the thick brown log that marks out a territory. The silhouettes are accompanied by ambient wind sound and the rhythmic sound of the sea washing back and forth. As the wind sound grows louder, we hear Akerman's whispering voice mutter some barely comprehensible words ('It's slow... never changes'), resulting in the textures and outlines of words supplanting the importance of their lexical definitions. During this sequence, we hear Akerman's partner singing faintly but her voice is masked by a plane passing overhead, followed by louder ambient wind sounds through which her friable voice re-emerges. Their voices are forever 'slipping away', to borrow from Ahmed, disintegrating into, while insistently distorting, the surrounding acoustic space. Akerman's treatment of sound and shadows fashions an experience of something failing to cohere, producing queer effects (Ahmed 2006: 170). Indeed, functioning a little differently from a sonorous 'holding' space that substitutes for the enveloping maternal voice, as Amal Treacher Kabesh argues in his Winnicottian study of soundspace, in *Maniac Shadows*, the acoustic space serves not as a 'soothing and containing soundscape' (2013: 68) conducive to normative desires. Instead, according to the argument I am putting forward, it supports all that is uncontainable and 'unholdable' within heteronormative space, facilitating alternative sensuous feelings and connections.¹⁰ Immersing visitors in elusive sounds is part of Akerman's queer strategy of spatial disintegration that could be said to undermine ocularcentricity. Rather than draw a clear demarcation between self and other, and self and world, the ambient sounds and soft voices, enhanced visually by the wavy dips in the sand, and the shadows that spill over its surface, intensify the visitor's queer experience of amorphous sensations.

Queering interiors and family lines

In *Ma mère rit*, illness, loss, interpersonal conflict and the desire to withdraw emerge as prominent themes. Akerman, in her role as first-person narrator, performs a creative rejection of the normalized gendered behaviour she is encouraged by her mother to uphold.¹¹ The narrator describes her mother's anger in hospital upon seeing her dressed in a 'dirty shirt' (2013b: 47–48). In another passage, she describes her mother's violent scolding of her for smoking (2013b: 84), before criticising her manner of eating (2013b:111).¹² Throughout the book, instances when the narrator fails to act, speak, and live her life in the 'right' way are illuminated. These facets of *Ma mère rit* speak to *Maniac Shadows*, primarily via the excerpt that Akerman reads. One memorable passage she recounts, included in the installation, consists of the narrator's observation that ever since her mother's health had deteriorated, 'she lets me

exist as I am'. Akerman continues: 'My mess no longer seems to upset her. She seems not to notice. She accepts. She accepts me as I am. It wasn't like that before...' (Akerman 2013b: 10). In the original French, the noun 'désordre' is used to convey the idea of 'mess' or 'untidiness' but this noun also signifies a state of confusion, muddle and disarray, words that might paint the narrator's difference in a negative light as something disturbed or immoral. In light of these observations, I would like to suggest that alongside the feelings of melancholy and sadness that permeate both *Ma mère rit* and *Maniac Shadows*, there is also a queerly-inflected unravelling at work that cultivates a less constricting and more subversive relational space for Akerman and her audience to grow into.

In *Maniac Shadows*, and primarily in the video triptych, Akerman performs a subtle queering of family through digressive camera work and decontextualized images and sounds. To illustrate this point, I will refer to an episode in the triptych that begins when Akerman films her own reflection in a mirror. As she turns her head to the right, our attention is drawn horizontally to the parallel shot on the right-hand screen where Natalia can be seen sitting in her chair (see Figure 2). The blue appearance of Akerman's bed steeped in shadow resonates with the adjacent parallel images of light blue sky and Natalia's blue chair, which, in turn, echoes the blue of Akerman's shirt in the separate film of her reading from *Ma mère rit*. The synchronicity of colour is, on one level, indicative of the close mother-daughter bond they share. In this part of the triptych, Natalia's outstretched body is framed by numerous family photographs positioned in the cabinet behind her. Yet these shots of Akerman and Natalia are soon abruptly replaced by a black screen, leaving visible only the stunning middle shot of a streaky, sunlit sky which continues for just under a minute, overriding the harmonious images of familial synchronicity with a shot of open space (the sky), which runs for a longer period.

[INSERT FIGURE 2]

Figure 2: Chantal Akerman, *Maniac Shadows*, 2013 [04:30]. Courtesy of The Kitchen, New York.

On the right-hand screen, where Natalia could previously be seen, we now see a shadowy return of the triptych's opening shot of a bathroom window, but the visible part of the image is narrower. On the middle screen, as the camera moves erratically downwards, a desert-like

scene unfolds, with sand dunes or mountains visible in the distance. The sky is exquisitely patterned by sunlight and smudges of cloud. The shot is accompanied by violin music and the violent revving of an engine, sounds that enhance the visual intensity of the lines and the volatile camera movements. These landscape shots of sky and desert that outlive and overshadow the homely sights of mother and daughter, signal, in my view, Akerman's quiet resistance to society's 'enforced synchronicity' of kin and generation (Freeman 2010: 38–39). Moreover, the mother-daughter line that Akerman affectionately forms (refer to Figure 2), allows her to simultaneously disrupt home movie conventions by accentuating the jittery shot of the open, desert-like space that exceeds the linear sequencing of reproductive family ties.

The first image to appear on the middle screen of the triptych comprises a bathroom window with a black border, through which smaller windows can be glimpsed on the wall of the building opposite. Whilst this static image might initially seem unimportant, I experienced it as filled with a queer resonance, which grew each time I encountered it. The queerness I am locating in this image plays a vital role in 'the "becoming oblique" of the world' that *Maniac Shadows* performs, and that Ahmed (2006: 162) attributes to the disorientation produced by objects becoming queer. We can see this in the details of the *mise-en-scène*, which I will now outline: the smaller windows are framed in black with a white interior border, making the rectangle on the left resemble a mini video cassette tape with two tiny eyes. A *mise-en-abyme* effect thus occurs in the middle of the screen, endowed with a potent strangeness because we are forced into a bewildering *face à face* with a brick wall. The image stands out, first and foremost, due to the skewed nature of the blinds, whose fanned-out ends flap crookedly on either side of the glass pane (see Figure 3). The framing of the shot is slightly lopsided, and the impenetrability of the blocked view that silently refuses our gaze, evades straightforward interpretation.¹³ The jarring strangeness generated by this image pushes the visitor back from the screen, instilling within them a peculiar sensation, a little like the ringing sound produced from running one's fingers around the rim of a glass. The window comes to life as the visitor inevitably pauses, immersed in its queer effect, as Ahmed would say, owing partly to Akerman's moving of background into foreground, as the wall becomes the 'view', with the uncanny aura of the image triggering a reconsideration of one's bodily position, or orientation, in the gallery space.

[INSERT FIGURE 3]

Figure 3: Chantal Akerman, *Maniac Shadows*, 2013 [0:00–0:26]. Courtesy of The Kitchen, New York.

The central position of the bathroom window calls attention to its unevenness and off-centeredness. The image is strikingly singular despite its obvious banality. Its intransigence makes it violent, according to Roland Barthes, because ‘on each occasion *it fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed’ (2000: 91, original emphasis). It casts a primitive but entrancing stare at visitors, unsettling their composure and possessing what Barthes calls ‘the photographic *ecstasy*’ (ibid.: 119, original emphasis). The image is accompanied by ambient sounds: we hear a man shouting and children playing, other muffled street sounds, and a faint ringing, indicating that the source of these indistinct sounds might be the television set in either Akerman’s or Natalia’s apartment. The surges in volume join up synaesthetically with the soft swelling of light shining through the bathroom blinds and the wobbles of the camera. This sound-image composition that launches the video, forms part of Akerman’s unabating play with perspective and framing, a prominent feature of the bordered stills in room two, one of which displays a shot of a door, revealing a stainless-steel toilet.

When considered alongside scenes from other of her films, we can read Akerman’s treatment of bathrooms as distinctly queer. We should pause for a moment to remember Akerman’s portrayal of the domestic space of the kitchen in her first film *Saute ma ville*, described by the filmmaker as her ‘queerest movie’. Here we encounter a young woman (played by Akerman) who rebels against traditional gender norms. She ‘explodes the norms that confine women to womanly tasks’, ‘breaks everything in the kitchen and does everything in a crooked way’ (Lebovici 2012: 97–98). The bathroom shots in *Maniac Shadows* also form a tacit dialogue with Akerman’s *Je tu il elle* (1975). In the mid-part of this film, Julie, the main character (played by Akerman), hitches a lift with a male lorry driver. After masturbating him at the wheel of his lorry, Julie transgresses the gender binary that frequently governs public bathrooms, by accompanying him into that space, standing in the corner and gazing with fascination at him as he shaves in front of the mirror, before watching and listening to him urinate in a cubicle. The bathroom mirror contains the man’s image within a finite, framed space from which Julie and the spectator are excluded, while the ‘unnatural’ sound of his electric razor leaks into the surrounding space. The organising codes of heterosexuality are thus

referenced by Akerman and aligned with the sense of sight, while at the same time they are sonically undermined through the film's aural register, which evokes notions of disruption, disintegration, and uncontrollable excess. In view of these observations, rather than evoking calmness, cleanliness, or comfort, I believe that in *Maniac Shadows* Akerman privileges the bathroom because it is connected to loss, excess, and the instability of bodily boundaries, and thus it is a site where norms of gender and sexuality can be disrupted. We should here recall the instances in *Ma mère rit* when the narrator contests both her mother's obsession with cleanliness and the importance she impresses on her of maintaining an appearance that conforms to heteronormative femininity. The loss of abject bodily fluids threatens to destabilize the unity of the self and the bodily ego, and consequently, the bathroom is a space that, 'as a geography containing stray fluids, sounds, smells – is felt to upset gender and subject integrity', as Sheila Cavanagh's study *Queering Bathrooms* makes clear (2010: 987).

Listening sideways: sensory disorientation

Akerman's reading from *Ma mère rit* in *Maniac Shadows* is decentred due to the intermittent surges in sound that characterise the reverberant acoustic environment of the gallery. Consequently, listeners are periodically distracted from the content of her speech, and their attention is drawn instead to the deep, guttural sound of her voice that overshadows the neat contours of her words. Attending to the sonic materiality of her voice, melded with the wider soundscape, allows a different interpretation of the installation to emerge that departs from the autobiographical accounts that have appeared in reviews so far. Commenting on Akerman's posture in the filmed recording of her reading, Amy Taubin (2013) notes that she 'is not speaking to us, but she allows us to overhear her words'. Her body does not confront the visitor, but is turned ambivalently to the side, hiding much of her face, and shifting attention to haptic auditory perception. As Irina Leimbacher proposes, 'haptic listening' is a kind of listening that prioritizes non-verbal, embodied expression, including the melodies, timbres and rhythms of the voice, while de-emphasizing referential meaning (2017: 293). The kind of voice that haptic listening calls forth is one that Leimbacher terms 'the sonorous voice'. This voice is 'not contingent on the power of rhetoric or the projection of inner subjectivity or political agency' but is 'a sonorous incarnation of embodied, audible relation' (ibid.: 293). In *Maniac Shadows*, Akerman's slowed speech that drags through the surrounding hubbub, activates the sonorous voice. It produces a sonic experience that is inherently relational and connects the visitor more

profoundly to the work than an experience governed by sight would allow. In a similar manner to the functioning of shadows, listening haptically to the speaking voice enables the perceived togetherness of speech, voice and body to be disrupted, thus destabilising the notion of a coherent and unitary self.

LaBelle's concept of 'the overheard' can help us to better understand the implications of these ideas in the context of the installation. He defines the overheard as constructing 'an acoustic space of continual excess, unsettling background and foreground, and charging the experience of face-to-face conversation with degrees of interruption' (2017: 281). Communication and interaction are derailed as 'the weave of self and surrounding is embraced as being riddled with an overhearing (and an overspeaking) that challenges how bodies come to relate' (ibid.: 284). In *Maniac Shadows*, the visitor is denied a direct frontal engagement with Akerman as she performs her reading. Her sideways posture is disorienting for any visitor whose sensory compass tends to be dominated by sight. This is because the accent is displaced to the 'in-between spatiality' of sound, which fills the surrounding space with 'an animating presence' that 'continually exceeds its own limits' (ibid.: 275). Akerman doubly impedes our view by her turn away from the camera and by the casting of her face in shadow. I understand this act of sensory and social disorientation as a queer strategy that deliberately repels and redirects the recipient's gaze. If the frontal placement of the camera carries great ethical weight in Akerman's cinema, then I would suggest that the oblique positioning of her body here performs a self-reflexive queering of her own cinematic gaze, in line with Ahmed's notion of queer as 'to disturb the order of things', producing an experience of 'obliqueness', 'distance' and 'disorientation' (2006: 161–62). Akerman's speech (delivered in English) is conspicuously marked by her Belgian accent, whose inflections embolden the textured sound of her voice as opposed to the meaning of her words. Her unusually slow enunciation, in line with Freeman's temporal rendering of queerness as presenting 'a productive obstacle to progress' (2010: 64), estranges her sound from the text on the page and allows her sonorous voice to peel away from its 'proper' place, as governed by the referential function of the words.

Returning to the video triptych, and building on these ideas, one could consider the sound of Akerman's own breath as another form of disorientation. In the last sequence to appear on the left-hand screen of the triptych, we find what I take to be a forty-second homage to *Sleep* (1963), Warhol's silent long duration film that features his lover, the poet John Giorno, sleeping naked in bed. The 'sleeper' images presented by Warhol, and fleetingly referenced by Akerman, share some common attributes: the use of close-ups, the manipulation of shadow and

light and the slowed film speed, which palpably stretches time through an abnormal slowness of motion.

Although Akerman makes no mention of Warhol in interviews on *Maniac Shadows*, her love of American experimental film is well documented.¹⁴ *Sleep* has a running time of more than five hours and whilst it seems to be composed of one excessively long shot, it actually comprises twenty-two grainy close-ups, some thick with shadow, which are spliced together in repeating sequences. Branden Joseph observes that the ‘organic, biological repetition of the sleeper’s breathing [...] is inscribed within a structure of technological reproduction, the same shot recommencing every four-and-a-half minutes’ (2005: 29). In the segment of the triptych to which I am referring, Akerman is filmed from the side in close-up, looking over to the bed next to her. However, unlike the sleeping lover in Warhol’s film, Akerman is presenting *herself* to an audience of strangers, thus performing another transgressive self-portrait of ‘[female] artist as lover’. As far as we can tell she is naked and the image speed has been slowed down. She moves her body to the right, revealing her neck and shoulders, before lowering her head closer to the bed and extending it backwards suggestively, half disappearing into darkness. In my view, Akerman is here imitating the closing moments of *Sleep* when Giorno’s face is steeped in vast pools of shadow, forming a deathly pose. Akerman’s breathing increases in volume at this very moment, kindling through sound as well as through image the hyperbolic voyeurism and homoerotic desire that infuses Warhol’s film. However, despite these correspondences, whilst in *Sleep*, the sleeper’s breathing plays a structural role but remains silent, Akerman’s breathing is heavy and conspicuous, drawing attention to the sensual sound of her breath. In this way, she thwarts the silent intimacy that is kindled, visually and structurally, in *Sleep* and injects a dose of bodily pleasure into her rendering of this moment. Her sustained concern with mess, disorder and bodily functions is here enhanced sonically by the material presence of her breath. Akerman displaces Warhol’s ‘contained’ image of a silent sleeper through sound, while making her body available as a site of queer intimacy and erotic possibility.

What I consider to be a ‘re-making’ of a segment from *Sleep* in Akerman’s *Maniac Shadows* produces the doubling effect that Ivone Marguiles associates with hyperrealism: ‘a cinematic translation of the effect of distance that results when a picture or sculpture reproduces a subject which is already an image’ (1996: 45). The consequent effects of estrangement and excess blurs the boundaries between the literal and the figurative, and between reality and representation. All the while, the visitor is lulled into a false sense of security by the sound of

Akerman's recorded voice emanating from the room next-door. She periodically declares: 'Before I understood that I had perhaps misunderstood everything. Before I understood that my vision was only truncated and imaginary', reading from *Ma mère rit*. As she questions the accuracy of her own erring perspective, the visitor is made to question the sincerity of her statements. The jarring effect of Akerman's citation of Warhol's film, and the vacillating rhythm and *unplacedness* of the entire installation, evokes the unsettled nature of the dislocated sensory experience that *Maniac Shadows* generates.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated throughout this article, one of the main aesthetic strategies at work in the installation involves the reorganisation of sensory experience and the privileging of indeterminacy, encapsulated by the ambiguous figure of the shadow. The focus frequently shifts from an eye-centred and speech-centred experience to somatic and affective experiences, helped by the perpetual overflow of sound that moves visitors in unanticipated ways. Akerman's queering of space functions aurally as well as visually, by eliciting a practice of 'listening sideways', which generates another form of sensory disorientation that I have interpreted as a sign of queerness. The amorphous soundscape and ambiguous shapes suspend the primacy of sight and undermine the concept of identity as unified, stable and unchanging, whether of a person, a sound or an image. Moreover, *Maniac Shadows* performs a queer re-patterning of familial relations that continues in *No Home Movie* (2015) and constitutes an exciting area for further research. The luminous wall-display of stills in room two of the installation conjures the tradition of family portraiture, through their depiction of interior domestic spaces, and through the commemorative effect of the white border. These images draw us ever closer to them but seem always just out of reach, hinting at, while rejecting, conventional bourgeois images of generational time and lineage. In the video triptych, the instances of jarring strangeness and digressive camera work, the sudden emphasis on background over foreground, and the unexpected sonic erotics of Akerman's body, are some of the ways in which sound and sensory experience are manipulated in *Maniac Shadows* to support queer modes of embodiment and intimacy. This is an installation that quietly but insistently rejects normative and monolithic itineraries and identities and is marked by incessant movement.

Bio

Albertine Fox is Lecturer in French Film at the University of Bristol. She is the author of *Godard and Sound: Acoustic Innovation in the Late Films of Jean-Luc Godard* (I.B.Tauris, 2017) and she has recently published a chapter on Chantal Akerman's documentary *De l'autre côté* in *Chantal Akerman: Afterlives* (Legenda, 2019), co-edited by Marion Schmid and Emma Wilson. Her current book project explores acts of listening and receptivity in contemporary French and Francophone documentaries.

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¹ This exhibition, curated by Julie Pellegrin, included projections of Akerman's first film *Saute ma ville* (1968), with the soundtrack muted, and her silent short *La chambre* (1972). These projections took place in two upstairs rooms, reminiscent of attic bedrooms, on either side of the central exhibition space. The exhibition also included a 2008 radio piece by Philippe Langlois and Franck Smith that was based on the sound recording from Akerman's installation *Marcher à côté de ses lacets dans un frigidaire vide* (2004).

² Some of the footage in the video triptych of Akerman's mother in her apartment reappeared her later film *No Home Movie* (2015).

³ *Ma mère rit* slips between unmarked narrative voices and interweaves black and white family photographs with stills from Akerman's films, and smaller images of interior and exterior spaces, some of which appear in *Maniac Shadows*.

⁴ See Judith Mayne's *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (1990), Alison Rowley's 'Between *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* and *Demain on Déménage*: m(o)ther inscriptions in two films by Chantal Akerman' (2010), and Ros Murray's 'The Radical Politics of Possibility: Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through Chantal Akerman's *Je tu il elle*' (2016).

⁵ Of the many discourses around queerness, I find Eve Sedgwick's recognition of the important fluidity of the term to be vital, if it is to continue to be used productively and 'in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes', as Judith Butler has stressed (1993: 173). Sedgwick notes that 'a lot of the most exciting recent work around "queer" spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all' (1993: 8–9).

⁶ Lisa Duggan defines homonormativity as 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds them and sustains them' (2003: 50). According to this definition, a homonormative relationship would aspire to, and be compliant with, heteronormative ideals and ideologies.

⁷ One could certainly read passages in *Ma mère rit* through a queer lens by drawing on Kathryn Bond Stockton's concept of 'growing sideways'. One of the self-portraits offered by the narrator in *Ma mère rit* is that she is 'an old child'; she was 'born old' and 'had never become an adult' (2013b: 25). Stockton's notion of growing sideways challenges the brutal 'vertical movement upward' that is required for 'growing up' according to the script of heteronormativity, which often means attaining 'full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness' (2009: 4).

⁸ See Victor I. Stoichita's *A Short History of the Shadow* (1997), David Melcher and Patrick Cavanagh's 'Pictorial Cues in Art and in Visual Perception' (2011) and William Chapman Sharpe's *Grasping Shadows: The Dark Side of Literature, Painting, Photography, and Film* (2017).

⁹ All screenshots have been excerpted with permission from the video uploaded by The Kitchen. Readers can experience the video triptych online at <https://vimeo.com/141589708>.

¹⁰ The acoustic choreography of this moment in *Maniac Shadows* reminds me of a sequence near the end of *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978) when Anna sings *Les Amants d'un Jour* (*Lovers for a Day*) by Édith Piaf for her sick male lover during their transient meeting in a hotel room. Rowley describes the sequence as 'amniotic' but devoid of any obvious 'containing effect' on her male lover, since the camera remains focused on Anna, on her fragile, non-professional singing voice and on the blank television screen (displaying white noise) that comes between her and the man (2010: 5).

¹¹ In her study of *Ma mère rit*, Schmid discusses Akerman's formal strategy of decentring the narrative perspective, which functions here and elsewhere in the director's oeuvre 'as part of a wider meditation on society's intolerance of otherness', which includes 'the normalising gaze of the mother' (2016: 1137).

¹² All translations are my own unless indicated otherwise. The first English translations of *Ma mère rit* are due to be published in 2019 by The Song Cave (translation by Corina Copp) and Silver Press (translation by Daniella Shreir).

¹³ After re-experiencing the video triptych online, I noticed parallels between this opening shot of the window, and the photograph *Portrait of Space* (1937) by the American-born photographer Lee Miller. Miller's photograph comprises a view of the Egyptian desert, visible through a torn mosquito net with frayed edges. Whilst it is beyond the scope of my study to explore this resemblance more fully, it is fruitful to consider the subversive use of framing devices in each work, which spoil the illusion of deep space and skew the perspective.

¹⁴ In an interview with B. Ruby Rich in 1976, Akerman describes the liberatory experience of seeing films by Michael Snow, Andy Warhol, Stan Brakhage, George Landow, and Hollis Frampton at the Anthology Film Archives in New York (2016: 18). In a later conversation with Gary Indiana, Akerman reveals that in the early 1970s she saw Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* (1966) and *Eat* (1963), but is careful to point out that her films differ from Warhol's, primarily because they are more sentimental and are prompted by the expression of a feeling (1983: 57–58).